

Exploring Luhmann's social systems perspective: Communication and exchange as the struggle for marketplace meanings

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Abstract

This article reviews Niklas Luhmann's social systems perspective and comments on his theory of communication. The perspective is extended to analyse the concept of exchange in the context of marketing. The social systems perspective illuminates the aspect of marketing exchanges as a power struggle to imbue goods and services with meaning. The authors argue that Luhmann's views offer a rich theoretical ground to transcend an understanding of marketing exchange as simply a swap of tangible and intangible value. Rather marketing exchange can be understood as a complex locus of meaning creation and negotiation with regard to the use of goods/services in the lives of both marketers and consumers.

Introduction

A communication does not communicate the world, it divides it. Like any operation of living or thinking, communication produces a caesura. It says what it says; it does not say what it does not say. It differentiates. (Luhmann, 1994, p.25)

Communication and exchange are two major buzzwords used often unequivocally in management and marketing literature. It would seem, on the surface at least, that

marketing represents activities to engineer exchanges through communication. The meaning of these concepts is often assumed to be straightforward and indisputable. Traditionally, the mechanistic notions of these concepts have dominated the business literature. In marketing texts, communication was predominantly explained via the transmission metaphor that was about a communicator who sends messages to an audience via a particular channel and gets feedback through another channel (Varey, 2000). Similarly, exchange was predominantly seen as transfers of tangible and intangible goods and services (Bagozzi, 1975; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). These simplistic notions have been criticised and put under scrutiny by many management and marketing thinkers (Bagozzi, 1975; Varey, 2000). Researchers have proposed a great number of alternative conceptualisations. One of the most important is the *Social Systems* perspective proposed by Niklas Luhmann (1995).

Luhmann's (1995) work on social systems is not an easy read. His conceptualisations are complex and abstract. He kept detailed explanations and illustrations at a minimum. There seems to be ample potential for developing situated/contextual understanding of his perspective with regard to key marketing issues. On this note, this article explores Luhmann's social systems theory and his views on communication. The authors extend Luhmann's discussion to the analysis of the concept of marketing exchange, although this social phenomenon has not been directly analysed by Luhmann himself. Hence, the first section of the article is devoted to a brief biography of Luhmann. Then, in the following section the antecedent theories that Luhmann adopted and adapted to the field of sociology are presented. The main tenets of Luhmann's social systems philosophy are described in the third section. In the fourth section, the focus is particularly on Luhmann's thought about communication and action. The implications of his thoughts on understanding of marketing communication are also drawn out in this section. In the final section of the article, the notion of marketing exchange is analysed in the light of Luhmann's theory.

The authors maintain that the abstractness of Luhmann's thought can generate different interpretations of his works. The present interpretation of Luhmann's analyses is not pretended to be the only 'correct' one. This interpretation may be one

among several explanations, indicating the richness rather than obfuscation of Luhmann's works.

Social philosopher of our age

Luhmann (1927-1998) can deservedly be called a prominent social philosopher of the current age. His conceptualisations are ranked at the same level as the ideas of great scholars and philosophers of modernity such as Kant, Weber, Heidegger, Gadamer, Foucault, Parsons, and Habermas. During most of his life, Luhmann lived and worked in Germany. Until retirement in 1993, he served as a full sociology professor at the University of Bielefeld. He was a prolific author, writing, in German, a great number of books analysing various aspects and dimensions of society (e.g. legal issues, politics, art, ecology, emotions, economics and markets, and society). His famous books translated into English are *Social Systems* (1995), *Ecological Communication* (1989), and *Law as a Social System* (2004).

Antecedent theories

To understand Luhmann's perspective one must learn the theoretical background of systems knowledge across different fields. Since the mid-20th century systems understanding has penetrated such science fields as cybernetics (von Foerster & Poerksen, 2001), mathematics (Gödel, 1929/1974; Prigogine, 2003; von Bertalanffy, 1950), artificial intelligence (Hofstadter, 1979), biology (Maturana & Varela, 1980), and physics (Peitgen, Jürgens, & Saupe, 2004). Luhmann's thought draws heavily on General Systems Theory developed by von Bertalanffy (1950). Von Bertalanffy argued that scientific investigations need to be directed toward phenomena in their wholeness. Societal problems would be irrelevantly formulated if concepts and their relations were studied in isolated fragments. According to von Bertalanffy (1950), the real life problems were those of "organisation" rather than "isolation" (p.134). He considered this perspective to be radically different to the analysis of isolated parts of phenomena, that is, deductive reasoning that he called "*the mechanistic worldview*" (p.165). The mechanistic worldview maintained that a system is constructed through the successive incorporation of element after element into the structure of a whole. In contrast, General Systems Theory proposed the *non-summativity principle* that depicts that complex systems either come forth as a whole or they do not exist at all.

Maturana and Varela (1980) studied autopoiesis in biological systems, and specifically, in organic cells. The concept of autopoiesis referred to the “networks of productions of components that recursively, through their interactions, generate and realize the network that produces them and constitute, in the space in which they exist, the boundaries of the network as components that participate in the realization of the network” (Maturana, 1981, p.21). In other words, Maturana and Varela argued that systems reproduce themselves through the autonomous creation and maintenance of self-reproducing mechanisms and structures. Maturana and Varela (1992) thought that the vitality of systems was reflected in autopoiesis. They argued that Darwin’s concepts of adaptation, natural selection, and the survival of fittest could not explain the evolution of autopoietic living systems. These concepts were thought to be relevant to systems in their mechanical depiction whose behaviour is determined by external changes. In contrast, autopoietic systems are seen to be driven by their internal structure, purpose, and processes. For them, survival would mean the purposeful maintenance of cohesion as a unity. Since the environment was thought to be the result of the system’s operations, the concept of surviving would not be meaningful from this system’s internal perspective. Maturana and Varela note that if a living system exists, then it is adapted, and if it ceases to exist, then it is not. So adaptation is not to be understood in terms of more or less degrees. Consequently, their view implies that living systems do not behave as if they are maximising their chances of survival, but rather they are driven to maintain the wholeness and congruence of their autopoietic structures and processes.

This theory was adapted by Luhmann (1995) into the description of autopoietic social systems. Luhmann (1995) argued that social systems, like cells, self-reproduce themselves via the networks of meanings. Moreover, he suggested that social systems complete “autopoietic turns” (Luhmann, 1995, p.9) through which they become operationally closed in their self-referentiality. This means that no operation is imported from or exported to the environment. However, Luhmann emphasises that social systems are indirectly open to perturbations in other systems’ communicative structures. This meant that a social system could only enforce internal changes in its operative domain while being triggered by the unity of all changes in the external environment.

Tenets of Luhmann's Social Systems Theory

In his seminal work on *Social Systems* (1995), Luhmann described General Systems Theory as a paradigm shift in “Kuhn’s sense” (p.6). Luhmann indicates that the shift of emphasis is from the dialectic of wholes and parts to that of systems and environment. He contends that it is problematic to conceptualise a part (e.g. a human being) that is able to accommodate the concerns of a whole (e.g. human society). In his view, the difficulty with the logic – a whole is more than the sum of its parts – is to explain the process through which a whole, the sum of parts plus something extra, was comprehended and given priority at the level of parts (i.e. by individuals).

Luhmann introduced the notion of *systems differentiation*. He argued that a social system differentiated itself from its environment through interpreting environmental complexity. The same system could become an external environment for its subsystems in a manner that is as complex as its higher level environment. This meant that systems actively constructed both themselves and their relevant environments (Luhmann, 1995). Luhmann goes on arguing that the elements of the system are systems in themselves, and they may possibly belong to other systems too when viewed from other perspectives. Thus, this picture of a systems universe does not resemble the straightforward notion of the hierarchy of systems; rather it is a world of *interconnected and interpenetrating* systems that dynamically differentiate from other systems. Luhmann (1995) insists that “systems can differentiate only by self-reference” (p.9). This means that social systems employ and build upon system-environment differences to create self-descriptions. Thus, the external environment with all its complexity is considered to be a necessary prerequisite for *self-observation*. Self-observation occurs when the system can segregate the self from the other, while both the self and the other remain a unique perspective of the system itself. The boundaries of the social system are thought to be *differences in communication* and created through the development of meanings. Luhmann views *meaning* as the product of self-referential adaptation to the complexity of the external environment. Meaning is defined as “a surplus of references to other possibilities of experience and action” (Luhmann, 1995, p.60). In other words, meaning is thought to be a *selection* that is actualised within a horizon of other possible selections. The process of circulation of system-unique meanings is called a “self-referential closure” (p.9). Hence, the social systems’ closedness or openness is resolved with

understanding the extent to which the system self-describes itself to be integrated or separated from the environment (Luhmann, 1995).

Luhmann's Social Systems theory maintains that the basic operation through which the system is self-referenced is *communication*. He conceptualises the act of communicating as an interactive, co-creational, and appreciative process in constructing common meanings and experiences. According to Luhmann, communication is not simply an exchange of messages; it is the very act of existing and living. Drawing parallels to Husserl's *transcendental phenomenology* (1970), Luhmann refers to communication as a process of distinction-actualisation that *carves out* a system from its environment. The idea is that communication rebuilds the system at each moment, and successive communications comprise a network that creates meaning, thereby providing necessary conditions for subsequent communications to follow.

Communication

In his book *Social Systems*, Luhmann (1995) starts his discussion of communication by rejecting the notion of communication as direct transmission. In particular, he states:

The metaphor of transmission is unusable because it implies too much ontology. It suggests that the sender gives up something that the receiver then acquires. This is already incorrect because the sender does not give up anything in the sense of losing it. The entire metaphor of possessing, having, giving, and receiving, the entire 'thing metaphoric' is unsuitable for understanding communication (p.139).

Luhmann notes that the transmission metaphor overemphasises two analytically separated events: a behavioural act of transmitting by a sender which he calls *utterance*, and the substance of what is being sent, i.e. the *identity* of information. Utterance could not be argued to be equal to communication. For Luhmann, utterance is a mere suggestion, an invitation to communicate. But it is neither a communication nor a necessary precondition for communication. The sender can only hope that his/her utterance creates a desired reaction by the receiver(s). The communication would not be actualised in the absence of any response or processing by the receiver. Similarly, the identity of information is never the same for both parties. Instead of

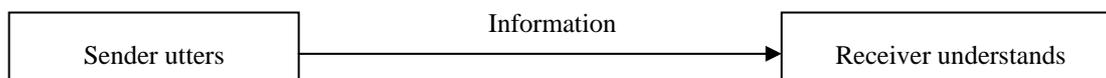
reading/decoding what is made available, these subjects construct what is being sent and received depending on their experiences, expectations, values, and motives.

At this point, Luhmann feels that he is facing a paradox. He was trying to explain an alternative vision using the old terminology which was very restrictive. So he suggested “reorganising the terminology” (1995, p.140). Three concepts were defined differently: information, utterance, and understanding. *Information* could now be posited as a selection out of the horizon of possible selections. For example, a commercial may suggest that *a car brand is environmentally friendly*. The horizon of possibilities is instantly constructed for this brand image communication; it would include all vehicle qualities which make the brand environmentally friendly and unfriendly. This car brand would stand out from among various characterisations such as small cars, powerful cars, inefficient cars, etc. *Utterance* is also defined as a selection: one selects a behaviour out of many possible behaviours through which the information is expressed. In the previous example, the car commercial can be presented in many forms. For instance, Volkswagen’s famous advertising campaign *Think Small* made use of irony as a key strategy in communication (Holt, 2002). In this case, Volkswagen’s utterance was in the form of irony and it was selected to communicate the following content – various reasons why people should despise small cars – which was relevant to US consumer attitudes in 1960s when everything was driven by ‘the larger the better’ logic. The irony was that Volkswagen was offering small cars. Here, the ironic approach of the company was contrasted to (put in the background of) *hard commercialism*, a common approach to sell and persuade consumers. Volkswagen distanced itself from hard commercialism by mocking and criticising its own product, thus creating an emotional link with its target market. In Luhmann’s view, selection of a particular behaviour constructs a horizon of relevant reference at the same instance, as the use of irony created a horizon of other possible references including hard commercialism.

The key in Luhmann’s paradigm is the third event, *understanding*. Understanding is also seen as a selection, that is, the selection of a distinction that divides the observed context into information and utterance. Recalling the previous example, the information such as ‘this car brand is environmentally friendly’ will be accepted differently depending on whether the utterance is taken to be ironic or literal (hard

commercialism). Ironic distancing fits well when environmentalism is linked to a gas-guzzling car brand, whereas a literal strategy would work with environmentalism linked to a fuel-efficient car brand. Misunderstanding is a possibility. There is a possibility that the statement *this fuel-efficient car is environmentally friendly* is taken to be the ironic communication. Luhmann argues that the three selections, information, utterance, and understanding come together as a unity to actualise what he calls *communication*. A communication never comes as a single event/thing; rather it is situated in the background of preceding and subsequent communications. Hence, in the social space there is no sender or receiver, but communications that are processes of interchanging selections of information, utterances, and understandings. In this regard, Luhmann exclaims that it is communication that communicates, not a person. Luhmann transforms the transmission metaphor into a two self-referential systems metaphor. This can be seen in Figure 1.

Transmission metaphor



Social systems metaphor

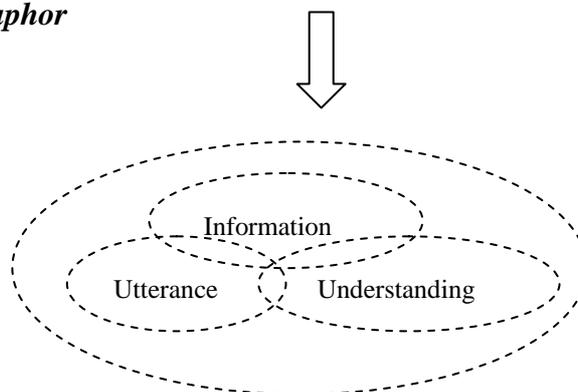


Figure 1: From transmission metaphor to social systems metaphor

In fact, for Luhmann there exists only one communication as a unit of analysis, not a double structure as shown in Figure 1. The double communication is a fraction of a bigger picture of many communications happening in society at the same time. In Figure 1 the fraction is portrayed to: a) indicate how agents are seen in the alternative framework, and b) show interaction between them which is not substantive but

perturbative. The concept perturbative relation means that changes in the other are observed and interpreted within the internal boundaries of communication. Two domains observe and become sensitive to each others' perturbations. Perturbations are not relations, they are not structured, and they do not resemble an intentional relationship. They are simply changes in the states of the agents. These perturbations are interpreted within communication. In this, communication becomes self-referential and closed. In this regard, Luhmann notes:

From the assumption that communication is a basally self-referential process that co-ordinates three different selections in each of its elements, it follows, according to systems theory, that there *can be no environmental correlate* for communication. The *unity* of communication corresponds to nothing in the environment (1995, p.144).

In other words, Luhmann is suggesting here that there is nothing in the environment that determines and steers communication. There are no structured messages, emotions, values, and intentions outside the communication's boundaries (i.e. in so-called 'individuals'). Everything equals complexity in the environment and this complexity (some use the metaphors chaos or uncertainty to indicate the same meaning) is reduced into a coherent meaning within communication. Luhmann states that communication is self-sufficient, but not autarchic, i.e. absolutely independent of other factors. Self-sufficiency is in the locus of meanings, so any condition (e.g. meanings) needed for communication to happen is created within the very structure of communication. However, communication can never happen without people, their psychological processes, the natural environment, and so on. Therefore it is thought to be not autarchic.

Luhmann's view encompasses such situations as unintentional communication. It is not necessary that something must happen outside the system (i.e. communication) in order to drive the three-part process of information, utterance, and understanding. Any change in the state of referenced others, even though no communication is intended, can trigger a process within the system. Any event (perturbation) can be registered internally as a distinction of information and utterance. This distinction is forced upon the observed subject, thus creating internal understanding of supposedly other-created meanings. Starbucks faced this situation in the US market (Thompson, Rindfleisch, &

Arsel, 2006). They had to face a problem of proliferating doppelganger brand images in consumer culture that tended to ridicule the Starbucks brand despite a well-developed strategy by the corporation to control the brand image through relevant, homemade emotional stories. Some consumers predominantly portrayed Starbucks as a monstrous corporation with unauthentic service offerings who is destroying the authentic coffee drinking culture supported by small neighbourhood cafés and bars. If Luhmann's view is applied to this context, then one can see that consumers distinguish between information, the corporate stories, and utterance, the corporation's commercial attitude and constant drive for profits. This understanding, i.e. constructing the distinction, is very unique to consumer culture and communication. No communication or intention by Starbucks whatsoever could directly influence this understanding. As Thompson et al note, the consumer's view is wrong and it has not been motivated by any of Starbucks's actions. Luhmann would say that the corporation's communication could not have direct impact on consumer communication; rather it can only play the role of a trigger. Ironically, any communication generated by Starbucks to defend its image may trigger the consumer distinction again and again and reinforce the doppelganger image. In this case, 'right' communication by the corporation fails to change 'wrong' communication by consumers, because these two domains are autopoietic, that is, they are independent in interpreting the other's action.

Exchange as power negotiation

Having reviewed Luhmann's key ideas about communication in previous sections, we would like to analyse the concept of exchange in the light of Luhmann's theory. The orthodox notion of exchange has dominated both classic and modern marketing thought. Most researchers were content with the view that marketing exchange is only about *giving and receiving* goods, services, value, and money. Marketing exchange as a metaphor of transmission presupposes ownership of something. However, marketing thinkers are now increasingly becoming discontented with the transmission view of exchange. Several research perspectives challenge this notion. Marketing exchanges are relational and dialogical rather than discrete according to the relationship marketing perspective (Gronroos, 1997; Gummesson, 1999; Varey, 2002). Moreover, management and marketing gurus suggest that exchanges are about co-creating value rather than distributing pre-designed value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo &

Lusch, 2004). Consumers' subjective experiences and practices are important in defining the use and value of goods and services according to consumer research (Holbrook, 1999; Holt, 2002; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Researchers also suggest that exchanges are about meaning creation, i.e. they embody symbolism (Holt, 1997; Levy, 1959; Stern, 1995). These perspectives indicate a common notion that exchange must be about a type of meaning negotiation in a marketplace. Here Luhmann's theory contributes understanding. The general character of his Social Systems perspective allows interpreting marketing exchanges as a space of meaning co-creation and negotiation.

There can be two approaches to consummating exchanges: transactional and relational (Varey, 2002). The transactional approach posits that exchange ends with, and is only concerned with, the act of giving and receiving. Everything else that follows the exchange is defined as post-exchange. The relational approach takes a long-term perspective arguing that exchanges are the outcome of human-to-human relationship processes, therefore their development and essence extends beyond a single transaction. Bagozzi (1975) defines marketing as the processes involved in the creation and resolution of exchange relationships. Examples from successful businesses show that exchanges go well beyond the definite point of good/service/money swaps (Gronroos, 1994). However, both approaches can be used as a business philosophy in real marketing situations.

From Luhmann's perspective, the transactional approach to doing business is not communicative. A marketer hands over a product, in addition, he/she develops and directs a marketing mix in relation this product, but refuses and/or avoids participating in consumers' meaning creation processes because of the transactional nature of the business. The product and marketing mix (product characteristics, brand image, advertising, price decisions, and distribution channels) become a mere proposition, i.e. triggers for creating understanding that is developed independently from the marketers. The product's meaning is created in use (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006), the locus in which the marketer's participation is kept at minimum by choice. Moreover, understanding of any marketing mix element arises without the participation of the marketer. The marketing mix elements are split into the information (for example, low price levels) and the utterance (e.g. sales promotions, discounting, etc.) which may

suggest negative meanings such as the marketers' product is not of high quality, among many other similar meanings. The point here is that consumer communication, i.e. meaning creation, becomes unpredictable for the marketer. The marketer's actions become simply a trigger for proliferation of an unintended cornucopia of meanings with which consumers will have to deal. For the marketer seeking to influence buying decisions, this is undesirable.

In the marketing locus, goods and services play the role of a communicative medium (McLuhan, 1964). Products are meaningfully differentiated (Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 1994), so they propose particular meanings to consumers. The availability of the product in the marketplace is an invitation to communicate solutions to consumers' problems. But communicate with whom? If the marketers restrict their involvement with consumers deliberately, then the meaning of the product evolves independently. Therefore, one can say that the offer in the market creates a need for communication as meaning resolution that otherwise has a chance of being resolved unpredictably. The relational approach reduces this uncertainty. Marketers can reduce the risk of uncertain meanings by engaging consumers in product use situations. By this, the information-utterance distinctions are made clear, the only choice being accepting or rejecting the proposed distinction. Luhmann notes that communication transforms the information-utterance distinctions into accept-or-reject choices. Subjects are forced into this selection. The 'innocent soul' of pre-communication will not exist anymore (Luhmann, 1995). If a person experienced a communication about a hybrid car brand being environmentally friendly, then they will have to act in the context of this understanding. His/her communication must start from either rejecting or accepting the distinction. The process of imposing meanings in the marketplace through exchange is thus a power struggle. The intention by the marketers to impose their meaning on consumers cannot be denied, because the product in itself embodies this hope.

Research agenda

The authors' programmatic research objective is to develop understanding of sustainable marketing practices from a societal perspective. This requires fundamental

reconceptualisation of major marketing concepts, one of them being the notion of marketing exchange. Marketing exchange redefined as a locus of meanings struggle opens up several promising directions in developing understanding of how marketers and consumers act in the marketplace. In particular, the issues of negative value exchange in such contexts as fraud, unethical marketing, greenwashing, covert marketing, etc are of interest. Such reconceptualisation would require careful conceptual and lexical clarification.

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